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SUBJECT: DPRK VIEWS FAMILY REUNIONS AS QUID PRO QUO FOR AID

Classified By: A/POL Brian McFeeters. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: While the recent increase in family reunions between separated North Korean and South Korean families suggests that such reunions are becoming normalized, it is likely that such reunions have reached a peak for the near future. Choi Young-woon, the head of the Inter-Korean Cooperation Team for the South Korean Red Cross, expressed a pessimistic outlook on future family reunions, and explained some of the difficulties in finding participants for the North-South family reunions. He also said that the DPRK viewed reunions at Mt. Kumgang between separated North and South Korean families as a bargaining chip to be used to gain humanitarian aid from the ROK in the form of rice and fertilizer. With President-elect Lee Myung-bak likely to tie further humanitarian aid to progress in the Six Party Talks, the future of North-South family reunions remains uncertain.
END SUMMARY.

Future Reunions

¶2. (C) Choi stated that North Korea's Red Cross organization had agreed to 400 reunions per year once the new family reunion center at the Mt. Kumgang tourism site finished construction. This would mean that such reunions would start around May 2008, when the center was expected to open. Choi was pushing for 50 family reunions per month for the last 8 months of 2008 in an attempt to regularize the meetings. Choi was pessimistic, however, about the chances of getting his DPRK counterparts to agree. Two meetings of 200 families each were more likely.

¶3. (C) Choi voiced his frustration about the DPRK's footdragging on family reunions. The DPRK, Choi said, viewed the reunions as a political reward as opposed to a humanitarian issue, and would cooperate only for quid pro quo such as humanitarian aid. Most of his North Korean Red Cross counterparts were temporarily assigned from the United Front Department or the military. They did not, therefore, have a stake in pressing for more reunions, and not surprisingly, did the minimum amount of work required, Choi said.

¶4. (C) The DPRK Red Cross's lack of motivation on the family reunions was most apparent in preparing for the reunions. The standard procedure was for 200 North Korean families and 200 South Korean families to request information about the whereabouts of their relatives on the other side. While the South Korean government would routinely find around 180 of the families requested by the DPRK for possible reunions, the DPRK would reply that it had only found around half (100-110) of the requested names. This happened, Choi believed, because the DPRK knew that only 100 families from each side would be united (100 requests from the ROK, 100 from the

DPRK, for a total of 200 total reunited families), and so would cease looking once it had reached the minimum mark required. While the North Koreans cited difficulties in locating the family members as the major cause for this discrepancy, Choi believed that the lack of interest on the part of his North Korean counterparts was the real reason. When Choi queried North Korean defectors who had arrived recently in Seoul, the defectors replied that the DPRK would have no difficulty tracking down its citizens if it really desired to do so. All that would be necessary would be a quick search through the residence registration system.

Why So Few Reunions?

15. (C) Choi said that many South Koreans with North Korean ties developed a defense mechanism of denying their North Korean ties during the 1950s-1970s, a mentality that persisted even today, Choi said. During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, a South Korean family could be ostracized for originally being from North Korea, or having relatives who had fled north during or after the Korean War. This was the reason most South Koreans with relatives in the DPRK did not register for the waiting list for future family reunions. (NOTE: This could also explain why U.S. citizens of Korean ethnicity sought Congressional approval before holding family reunions with their North Korean relatives. END NOTE) The number of registrants was only in the thousands, while Choi believed that the actual number with North Korean relatives might number in the tens, or even hundreds, of thousands. In addition, many South Koreans with North Korean relatives believed that their most immediate North Korean relatives, such as siblings or parents, had likely passed away, leaving only tertiary relatives whom they had never met and had no interest in meeting.

16. (C) For similar reasons, the vast majority of North Koreans requesting family reunions were not those seeking immediate family members. Choi stated that a North Korean could not admit to having a close South Korean relative because the North Korean might then be placed in the "to be viewed with suspicion" lower-third class of North Korean society. Distant relatives, on the other hand, were viewed as less likely to arouse suspicion.

Background

17. (C) The most recent family reunions at Mt. Kumgang were held on October 17-21, 2007, as a follow-on action to the October 3-5 North-South Summit. Further meetings were held via videoconference on November 14-15, 2007. The Family Reunion Center at Mt. Kumgang was officially declared open on December 7, 2007, though construction was scheduled to continue until May 2008. While MOU had pressed for a Director General-level supervisor at the site, the DPRK had asked for a lower-level official to jointly head the site. Following the halt of aid shipments by the ROK after the 2006 DPRK nuclear test, the DPRK had suspended family reunions. Now that such aid had resumed, the DPRK was allowing the family reunions to resume.

Comment

18. (C) Choi's pessimistic appraisal suggests that the past few months of family reunions were probably an all-time peak. While President-elect Lee Myung-bak has expressed a desire to tie humanitarian aid more closely to North Korean deliverables such as further family reunions and explanations about South Korean POWs, this harder line toward the DPRK might have the effect of collapsing what humanitarian exchanges currently take place. The ROKG's provision of humanitarian aid, particularly in food aid, has made the DPRK less dependent on international food aid from sources such as

the World Food Programme, but an ROKG demand for greater reciprocity from the DPRK might make the DPRK rethink the attractiveness of international food aid. END COMMENT.
VERSHBOW